

Colleagues Recall Judge Cecil F. Poole

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At a gathering last week in San Francisco, friends and colleagues of the late Ninth Circuit Judge Cecil F. Poole shared fond memories of a man devoted to family, community and the law. In the process, they vividly recalled some of the most colorful and contentious times in American history.



From refusing to swim in a segregated pool as a young officer candidate at an Army base in Alabama to deftly wielding his authority as United States Attorney to prevent a clash between police and students on the streets of Oakland at the height of the Vietnam War protests, the stories portrayed Judge Poole as a man of principle who led by example.

Organizers and speakers included, from left, Laurel Beeler, James Brosnahan, Jerry Braun, William Coblentz, Sharon O'Grady and Richard Urdan.

"He had a demeanor that demanded respect. And there was something about him that made you want to live up to his standards, which were impossibly high," offered attorney James J. Brosnahan, Jr., who served as master of ceremonies for the event, held in the ornate ceremonial Courtroom One of the James R. Browning U.S. Courthouse.



Judge Poole's daughter, Patti, and granddaughter, Nikki, were recognized at the event.

In the audience were judges of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals and the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California, a number of nationally prominent attorneys, and Judge Poole's daughter, Patti, and granddaughter, Nikki.

"Judge Poole was a great story teller. We thought what better way to keep his memory alive than to bring together the people who knew him best and let them tell some stories," said Sharon O'Grady, president of the Northern California Chapter of the Federal Bar Association, which

sponsored the event.

Besides Mr. Brosnahan, also sharing recollections of Judge Poole were distinguished attorneys Jerome I. "Jerry" Braun, William K. Coblentz, Richard Urdan, a former federal magistrate judge, and Laurel Beeler, an assistant U.S. Attorney in San Francisco. Ms. O'Grady and Ms. Beeler clerked for Judge Poole from 1981-82 and 1992-94, respectively.

Although unable to attend due to illness, another of Judge Poole's contemporaries, Senior District Judge Thelton E. Henderson of the Northern District, offered comments by way of videotape shot for an upcoming documentary on his own life. In the segment, Judge Henderson described Judge Poole as a great friend and mentor to whom he often turned for help and advice.

Judge Poole died in 1997 at age 83 after having served on the federal bench for more than 20 years. He was nominated to Northern District court by President Ford in 1976 and to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals by President Carter in 1979. He served as active judge until 1996, when he took senior status. Prior to coming onto the bench, he was appointed by President Kennedy as U.S. Attorney for the Northern District, the first African American U.S. Attorney in the country.

Born in Birmingham, Ala., and raised in Pittsburgh, Judge Poole made the most of his educational opportunities, earning undergraduate and law degrees from the University of Michigan and a Master's in Law from Harvard University in seven years, 1932-39. After World War II, he and his wife settled in San Francisco, where he became an assistant district attorney for the future governor of California, Edmund G. "Pat" Brown. After his election in 1958, Gov. Brown brought Judge Poole on as his extradition and clemency secretary, setting him on the path to even greater success.

"He was much more than a black man who was given an opportunity. He was a black man who seized the opportunity and ran with it," observed Mr. Brosnahan, an assistant U.S. Attorney under Judge Poole.

Mr. Urdan, another assistant U.S. Attorney, described Judge Poole, "an inspiration and model for everything a good lawyer should be," but not someone you would want to make angry too often. He recounted that when he and other attorney were hired, Judge Poole refused to tell the press how much they would be paid. Undaunted, reporters ferreted out pay figures for everyone in the office, learning that the newcomers were being paid more than everyone else as Judge Poole sought to raise salaries to attract more qualified lawyers.

"Cecil was livid, he was enraged. It was then that you really learned about the weight and depth and breadth of his 'presence,' " Mr. Urdan said.

Mr. Coblentz, who had long been friends with Judge Poole, practiced with him for a time beginning in the late 1960s. Their firm represented the famous rock band Jefferson Airplane and the two lawyers once met lead singer Grace Slick. Through a misunderstanding, Ms. Slick came to think the lawyers smoked marijuana, so when they were later invited to dinner at the band's communal home, they found two neatly rolled joints alongside their silverware. After a moment to consider their exit strategy, the pair beat a hasty retreat out the door, Mr. Coblentz recalled.

The late 1960s and early '70s saw the rise of the anti-war movement on college campuses, most particularly the University of California at Berkeley. Both Mr. Brosnahan and Mr. Coblentz figured into the episode in which the then-U.S. Attorney Poole helped prevent a violent confrontation between police and students marching to the Oakland Army base. As if the situation was not precarious enough, there was a group of Hells Angels watching from the sidelines, awaiting their opportunity to wade into the fray.

"Frankly, I think Cecil liked the action," said Mr. Brosnahan, who accompanied his boss to the scene.

Mr. Coblentz, who was present as a member of the UC Board of Regents, remembers Judge Poole instructing him to take care of the students while he took care of police. And if the Hells Angels move in, they were both to "run like hell, and that's what we did," he said.